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Prunella Clough

Arts Council

PRUNELLA CLOUGH

A selection from the retrospective exhibition held in September 1960 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

City Art Gallery, York	June 24—July 15, 1961
College of Art, Bournemouth	July 22—August 12
Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry	August 19—September 9
Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries	September 16—September 30
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Art Gallery, Derby	December 9—December 30

ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

Designed by Gordon Carter MSIA

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Foreword

The present exhibition of paintings by Prunella Clough is drawn largely from the retrospective collection of her works shown in the autumn of 1960 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, and the Arts Council are grateful to its Director, Mr. Bryan Robertson, to the lenders of works and to the artist herself for making the pictures available for showing in galleries outside London. Much of the material in the present catalogue has also been taken from the catalogue of the Whitechapel exhibition.

G.W.

Introduction

Tenacity of purpose is always exhilarating to watch. At the present time, when enthusiasms move in ever briefer cycles, it cannot always be easy for younger artists to hold to a central objective. Such are the vagaries of our exhibiting machinery that it is only now, after a lapse of seven years, that we can see Prunella Clough to be a painter of remarkably consistent vision: unflamboyant, content to make her statements in a still, small voice, but a perfectionist, determined to find the exact pictorial form for her thought; acutely aware of the main stream of art all about her but never deflected by it from her chosen course.

Her roots, inevitably for one of her generation, are in the 'forties: that curious, hot-house period of British art, already unreal now with the remoteness of the very near past. It is a period which has yet to receive objective study as a whole. Before the war, individuals had grouped themselves from time to time the better to do battle against parochial standards but this was the extent of their common ground. By 1950, Sutherland was crossing his sevens Continental-style and everyone was strenuously proclaiming himself more international than the Biennals. In between, for a decade, the pressures and isolations of war engendered something that came near to being a national movement.

The English are not given to group activity in the arts and, indeed, the divergences between the artists of the 'forties are considerable. Yet to future historians, I suspect, the homogeneity of the period will seem inescapable. Nash, Moore, Sutherland and Piper established in the first two years of the war an unshakable hegemony over the following generation. To their influence was added, in the second half of the war, that of Wyndham Lewis and Jankel Adler. Many other painters were pursuing very different aims during this decade but it is surely with these names and those of the succeeding generation linked with them—Colquhoun, MacBryde, Vaughan, Minton, Ayrton, Rosoman and a few others—that the decade will be primarily associated. It was in this company that Prunella Clough first found her feet as a painter.

The neo-romanticism of the day was compounded of curious and varied elements. Deep perspectives and double images were in the air. *Guernica* had not long since burned a vocabulary of violence into the general consciousness. The *genius loci* was a potent talisman and the "organic" was much bandied about. The poetic ambiguities of Nash and Sutherland were linked with the rediscovery of Samuel Palmer. There were injections of contrived

poignancy derived from de Chirico and Blue Period Picasso and early Berman. The textural bravura of Piper somehow got caught up with the accomplished cuisine of Adler. Adler's formal assurance was brought into harness with Celtic pattern-making, with Sutherland's horned shapes and with the metallic precision of Wyndham Lewis. Essentially, what all this was about was a wish to cage the intensity of a Shoreham drawing, the elegiac melancholy of a Berman ruin, the expressionist impact of Northern portraiture, in a formal framework of sufficient strength to avoid a collapse into romantic chaos.

And yet, concurrently with all the talk of "encounters" and "correspondences", a strong undercurrent of realism ran through the late 'thirties and 'forties. It was not just a matter of getting used to living in a kit-bag or suffering power cuts. There were Mass Observation, *Picture Post*, the Crown Film Unit, the proletarian stories in *New Writing*. One of the things which distinguished the painters I have mentioned from those of many other romantic revivals was their refusal to seek their subject matter in the exotic. Theirs was a romanticism of then and there: it sprang from the mean streets of great cities, the casual yet significant gestures of labourers, the bizarre quirks of the human condition in the twentieth century. Revelation, not escape, was its aim.

This was the particular seam to which Prunella Clough was to return again and again. Even today it remains the key to her work. She is an urban painter of the mid-century. The signs and winking lights of the by-pass, the dark debris of the industrial waste-land, the structures of mysterious purpose that provoke no twist of the head from the uncurious: these are the sort of things that she turns to her own purposes.

In retrospect, it seems scarcely chance that she spent most of the war years as a mapping and engineering draughtsman. Immediately before and after, she was casting around, as students do, trying her hand at posters and a bit of layout, woodcarving, watercolours, clerical jobs. When she really began painting it was to the nets and boats and men of the East Anglian fishing ports that she turned first. Seeing these pictures again after thirteen years, one is struck by the extraordinary rapidity with which she found her own authentic vision. Their monumentality is that of the set-piece of youthful ambition but the reticence of their colour and tonality, the delicate indeterminacy of certain passages of paint, the contemplation of some off-beat detail, the flat patterning of the picture surface—all these have remained an essential part of her pictorial handwriting ever since.

From Lowestoft it was but a step to the London docks. Here in the canyons of the warehouses, among the derricks, she made her first major effort to get to grips with the human figure; specifically to integrate it with an activity and an environment. The lorry drivers of this time, so strenuously tough in their treatment, represent perhaps the least ingratiating period of her work. Colour is bleached out to the putty and-buff of a canteen wall and in them the linear treatment that has always characterised Prunella Clough's work seems to me to lack sensitivity. This, to reverse the vernacular tag, was where we went out, for to all intents and purposes, none of it has been seen since.

Since 1953 she has had one brief spell of purely rural subjects. With this exception her sources suggest a directive drawn up by the late M. Zdhanov: gasworks, cooling towers, mining landscapes, chemical works, electrical installations, printing shops, the urban skyline. From such unfeminine stimuli she has distilled a body of work covering ground untouched, to the best of my knowledge, by any other contemporary painter.

Prunella Clough approaches the urban and industrial scene, not to record it in terms of grandiose commonplaces but to observe its forms in all their strangeness, with as much objectivity as she can muster, and then to find for them a pictorial equivalent

as expressive as, say, Sutherland showed was possible in his war-time records of bomb damage. She paints these things, I should say, because she is tough-minded, non-escapist, determined to identify herself with the realities of a world shaped by industry, science and technology. Four-fifths of us live in towns of over 50,000 inhabitants. The countryside has retreated over the skyline. Girder and roofline form our horizon, tips and spoil heaps our hills and dales, signs and columns and overhead wires our forests. One in a thousand has seen geese on the wing against the setting sun; we have all seen starlings wheeling against an overcast sky. For forty-million people in Britain today, these are the facts of life and by and large the painters have shirked it. Prunella Clough, it seems to me, feels deeply the need to recreate the visible world that is common to all of us, to see it freshly and make us aware of it in all its unexpectedness. We are back with Wyndham Lewis in *Tyro* 2: "One is to display a *strange* world to the spectator, and yet one that has so many analogies to his that, as he looks, startled into attention by an impressive novelty, he sees his own reality, through this veil as it were, momentarily in truer colours".

Through the years, she has tended to narrow her sights, to concentrate more and more upon a simple image, increasingly abstracted, the implications of which spread well beyond the picture frame. At the same time, she has relaxed her handling of paint. There is about the early paintings a carefulness that betokens something less than full confidence. In those of the last five years, there remains a characteristic reserve but no lack of assurance.

Our old friend the *fieitgeist* has undoubtedly played his part in this. Abstract expressionism, with its automatism and informality and glorification of pigment as pigment, has clearly helped to liberate Prunella Clough from any tendency to over-deliberation. Dubuffet looms through her figures, where once it was Colquhoun. Her forms acknowledge the curious power of Hilton's uncouth shapes. Were meeting points of this kind significant, the list could be extended. Here is a tree that appears to pay homage to a 1911 Mondrian; there is a burnt ditch that echoes Ernst's world of petrified vegetation, dense and compressed; and so on. In the case of Prunella Clough such acknowledgments seem to me of no great interest, for never was anyone less in the grip of the fashion-neurosis. An exceptional consistency of vision gives to all that she has done for fifteen years her own clear stamp.

Certain visual themes and images recur again and again. She likes seeing *through* things: glass, for example, and nets and space frames of one kind and another, as in the early *Greenhouse* subjects, a later series of landscapes through a window; the early fishermen's nets find their equivalent in last year's wirescapes. She likes the sudden intrusion of something hard, and usually rectangular, into softer areas of indeterminacy. She is fascinated by the conjunction of sky and land, or sky and man-made object on the land. All her work has a considered, static, quality. It might almost be said that she turns everything into still-life. Movement occurs but it is generally no more than the pattern of small-scale movement within a larger, static container: the flutter of birds, a waterfall of fish, the convolutions of barbed wire in a lumpish heap, the surface swirl and belch of liquid in a vat. This enlivening of the flat surface of a shape with a flicker of textural intricacy is one of her most characteristic tricks. Her figures, when they occur, loom heavily and motionless. Man she sees as cast into anonymity by an identification with his labour or his surroundings so great that it is not always easy at first to disentangle him: his feelings, skills, memories have been subordinated to his existence as a statistic, a producer of man-hours, a figure in a cloud of steam, the instrument and product of a pattern of society too complex for the old humanities.

The restrictions of her palette must be prompted in part by the nature of her subject matter, in part by her own deeper instincts. Only occasionally, as in

Street at Night, does she throw her cap over the windmill. Sometimes she sidesteps the whole issue of colour, sometimes makes a somewhat arbitrary gesture of violence. Her natural feeling—and it is one she shares with many other women painters—is towards subtle modulations within a narrow tonal range that will maintain the overall simplicity of the form. This can produce affecting passages—for example, a small cloud in an otherwise uniform sky—and gives a soft bloom to her greys. Prettiness, however, she clearly mistrusts: hence the sometimes brutal intrusions of sour colour in an otherwise sombre work.

The truth of the matter is she is a northern artist and thinks, like how many other English painters, in charcoal. From probity of line follows a love of calmness and rationality of construction. She attended, and enjoyed, lectures by Ozenfant soon after the war; it is not fanciful, I think, to catch Purist echoes here and there in her work. Mondrian she admires; the scaffolding of horizontality and verticality is seldom quite out of sight in what she does. Here surely is the central pivot of her art: the point where that "disinterested play of thought" to which Breton referred in his definition of surrealism, meets a powerful urge to formalise and construct. It is this attempt to hammer out a hard and enduring framework for a very delicate perception which relates Prunella Clough's work to the aspirations of the 'forties and gives to it its particular quality.

In the last year or two the final image has come very close to non-figuration; her handling of her material has grown more obviously intuitional, even up to a point impulsive. At no point, however, has it been so uncontrolled by the conscious mind that it represents a free clash between brush and canvas. Her paintings are never mere records of physical action, awaiting fulfilment in the eye of the beholder like Leonardo's wall. In some degree every work of art finds its completion thus but in your abstract expressionist the artist's disengagement is complete. For Prunella Clough, the starting point remains of primary importance. She profoundly mistrusts the ease of picture-making in a vacuum, the absence of criteria. At the core of her painting, however greatly removed it may be from the starting point, there remains the wish to communicate a deliberate content that makes reference to common experience and the visible world. Her titles are very typical of her. They are detached (often they have to do duty for a whole series of works) but allusive in an abstract sort of way. They provide the spectator with just enough clue to enable his contemplation to range back in the direction of that same starting point where the painter's own contemplation began. They serve to measure the degree of daring of the visual metaphor employed, and to establish a tension between concept and image without which the latter would appear flabby and inert. Many abstracts today are hard and brittle, or soft and amorphous. If you tried to eat them, they would either splinter into fragments and cut your mouth or they would dissolve quickly and sweetly like so much candy floss. Prunella Clough's have a tougher, chewy consistency. There is a weight and density about them even when they are very light in tone, which I attribute to this struggle of a particular object to find a particular image.

Here, then, are some forty paintings, made over a period of fifteen years. They are neither very large, nor violent, nor colourful, nor exceptionally inventive in any formal sense. They refuse absolutely to importune the spectator. Stillness and silence seem to reign. But then one becomes aware of the kind of small background sounds that previously the ear has subconsciously disregarded: the dry crunch underfoot of the burnt ditch, the wind humming in the wires of the transformer station. "I like paintings that say a small thing rather edgily", she says.

Michael Middleton

Biographical note

1919 Born in London.

1938-9 Was a student at the Chelsea School of Art, and has been a part-time teacher there in recent years.

1940-5 Worked at various clerical and draughtman's jobs during the war.

1946-9 Lived in London, visiting East Anglia. About this time made a number of lithographs and etchings.

1950-60 Continued to work in London, and based paintings mostly on urban subjects, some derived from visits to the Midlands.

Principal one man shows

Leger Gallery 1947

Roland Browse and Delbanco 1949

Leicester Galleries 1953

Group Exhibitions

Pittsburgh International, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, U.S.A. 1950

Painters' Progress, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1950

An exhibition of drawings, Redfern Gallery, London, 1951

60 Paintings for '51, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain for the Festival of Britain, 1951, London, and subsequent tour in provincial cities

First Anthology of British Painting 1925-50, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1951, London and Manchester

I Bienal at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Sao Paulo, 1951

Figures in Their Setting, organised by the Contemporary Art Society at the Tate Gallery, London, 1953

Recent British Painting, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1954

British Painting and Sculpture 1954, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

Vision and Reality, Wakefield City Art Gallery, 1956

The Guggenheim Foundation International Award, R.W.S. Galleries, London, 1960

Works by Prunella Clough are in the following public collections

The Arts Council of Great Britain; The British Council; Clare College, Cambridge; Education Committee, Derbyshire County Council; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; City Art Gallery, Manchester; Norfolk Contemporary Art Society; Christ Church, Oxford; Pembroke College, Oxford; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Education Committee, West Riding of Yorkshire; Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, U.S.A.; Graphische Sammlung, Albertina, Vienna.

The measurements are given throughout in inches, height preceding width

Catalogue

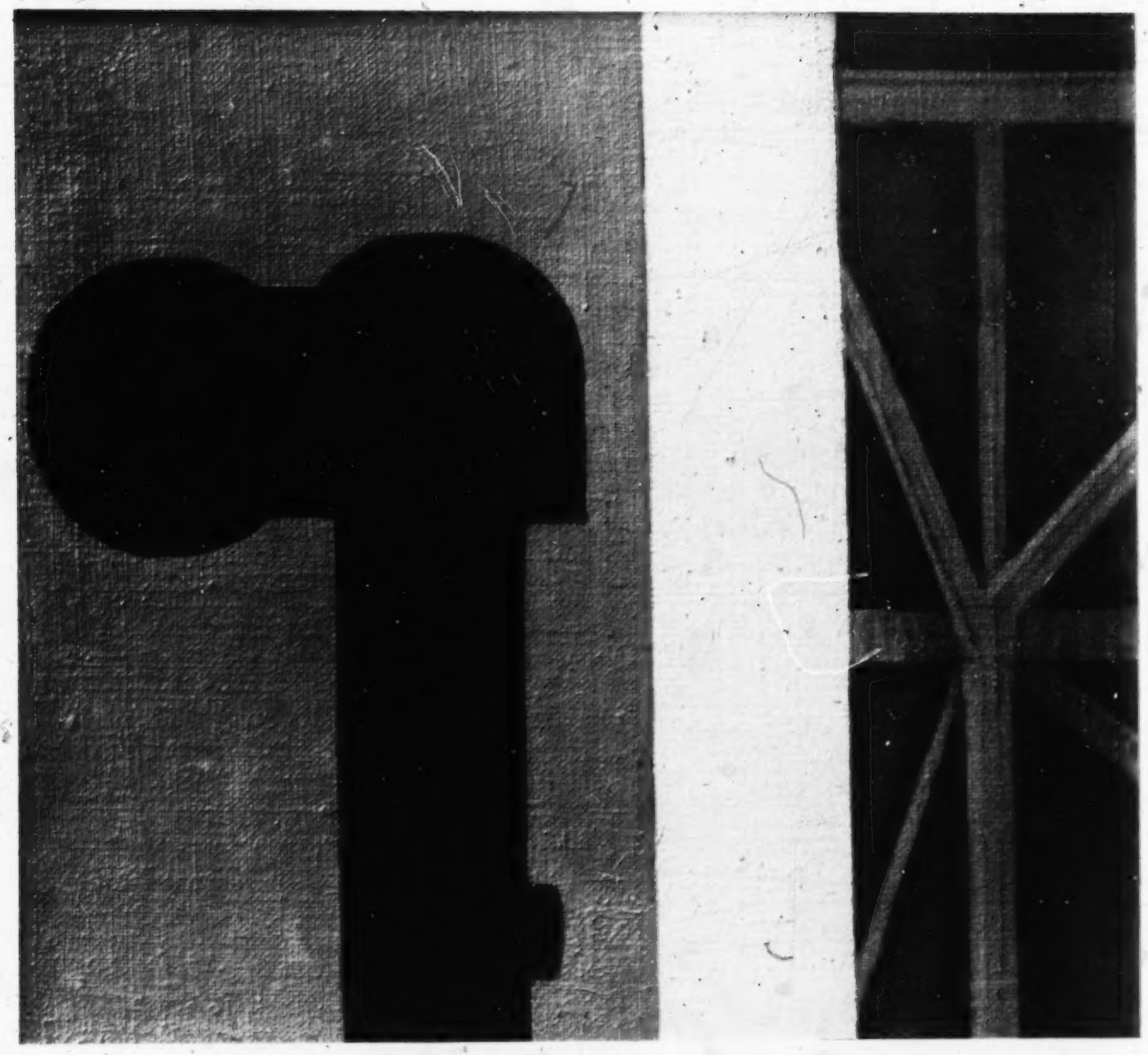
1 **Men in a Boat** 1949
Oil on canvas 55 x 30
Lent by Dr. Henry Roland

2 **Manhole I** 1951
Oil on canvas 24 x 19
Lent by the artist

3 **Factory Interior I** 1953
Oil on canvas 20 x 29
Lent by the artist

4 **Factory Interior II** 1954
Oil on canvas 35½ x 20
Lent by the artist

5 **Gasworks** 1954
Oil on canvas 32 x 25
Lent by the artist



Industrial Interior I 1956 (12) 21½ x 24 in

6 **Yard with Scrap Metal I** 1954
Oil on canvas 17 x 22½
Lent by the artist

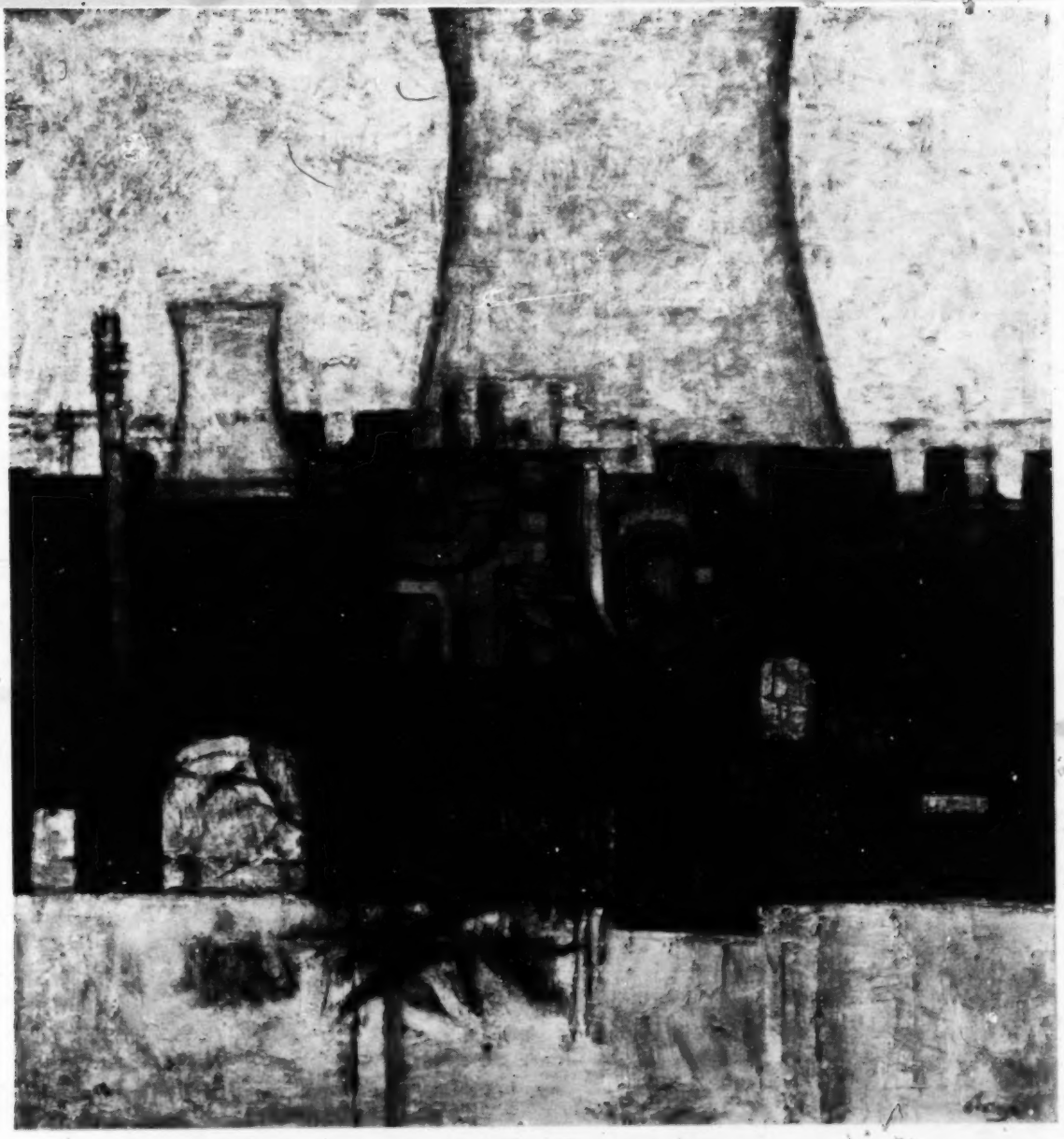
7 **Landscape with Cotton Grass** 1955
Oil on canvas 16 x 20
Lent by the artist

8 **Winter Hedge** 1956
Oil on board 34 x 25½
Lent by The Hon. Peter Harvey

9 **Autumn Plants** 1956
Oil on board 14 x 13
Lent by the artist

10 **Pond by Chemical Works I** 1956
Oil on canvas 25 x 30
Lent by the artist

11 **Pond by Chemical Works II** 1956
Oil on canvas 28 x 30
Lent by the artist



Cooling Towers 1957 (13) 26 x 24 in

12 **Industrial Interior I** 1956
Oil on canvas 21½ x 24
Lent by the artist

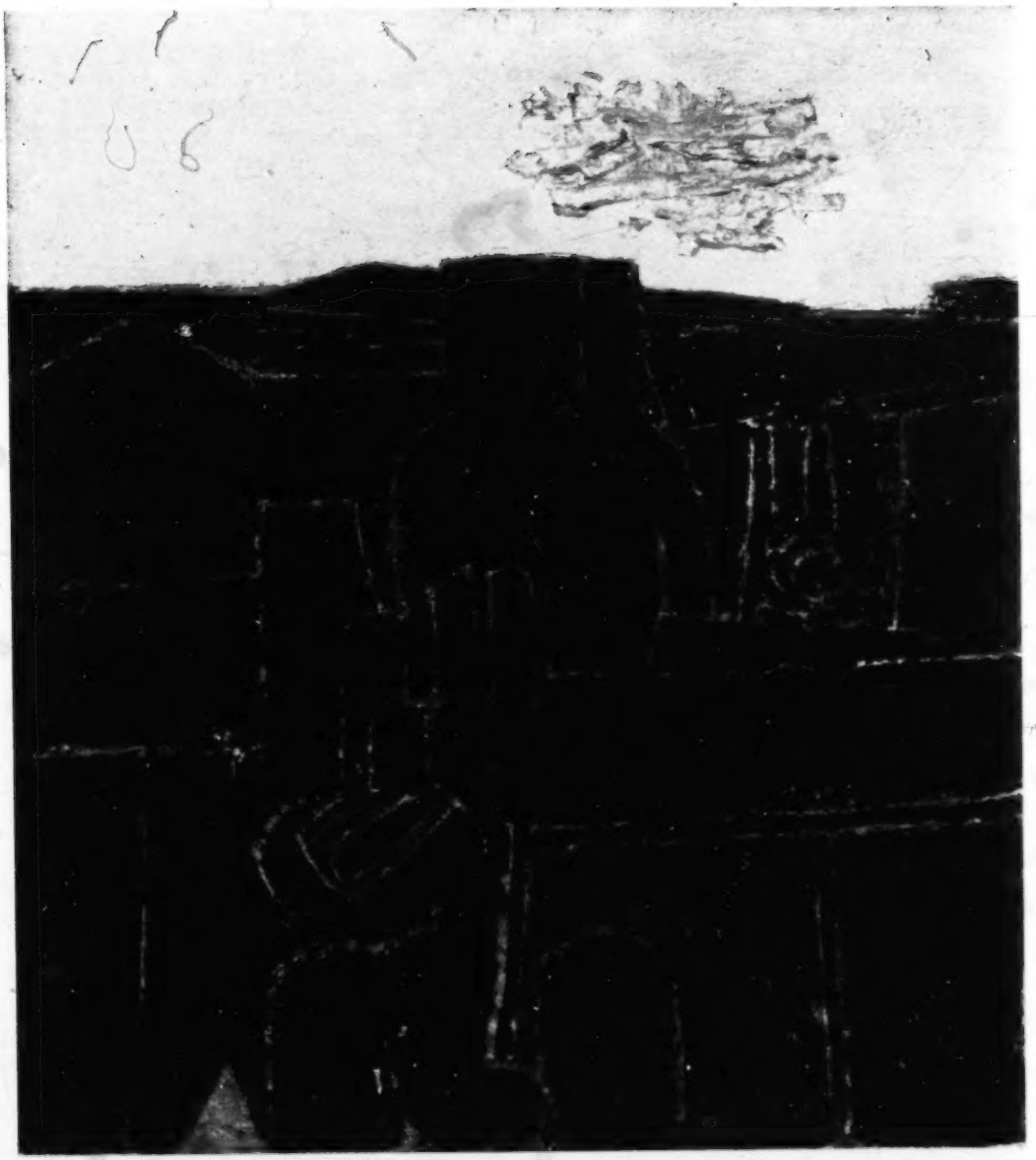
13 **Cooling Towers** 1957
Oil on canvas 26 x 24
Lent by Mrs. H. Tomalin

14 **Man under Catwalk** 1957
Oil on canvas 23 x 38
Lent by the artist

15 **Paper Bales** 1957
Oil on canvas 34 x 44
Lent by the artist

16 **Landscape with Tank** 1957
Oil on canvas 24 x 24
Lent by the artist

17 **Wharf Landscape** 1952/8
Oil on canvas 14 x 20
Lent by the artist



Town from Train 1958 (23) 29½ x 26 in

18 **Man by Building Site I** 1958
Oil on canvas 21 x 24
Lent by the artist

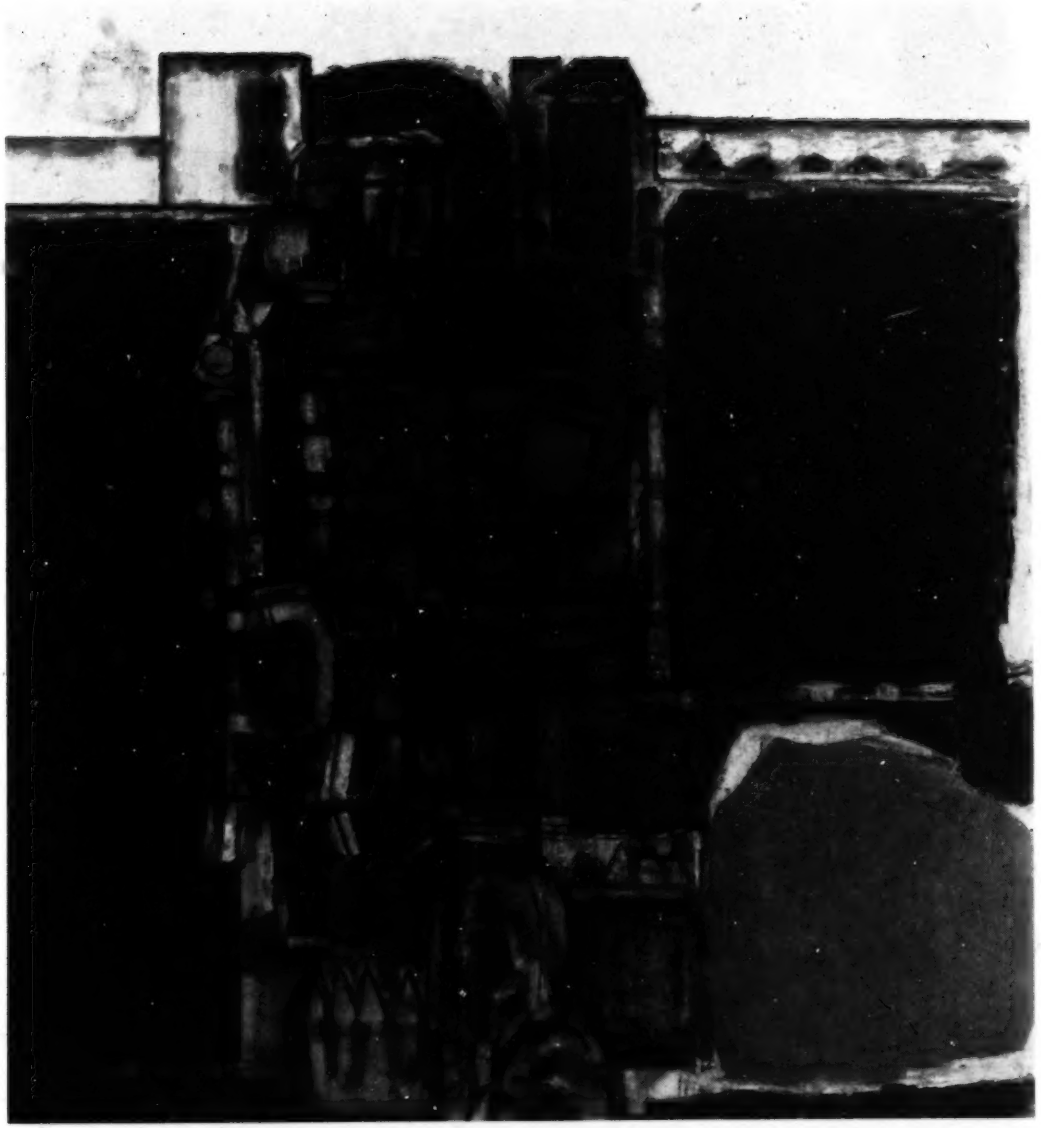
19 **Still Life** 1958
Oil on canvas $9\frac{1}{2}$ x $12\frac{1}{2}$
Lent by the artist

20 **Scrap-heap I** 1958
Oil on board 10 x 12
Lent by the artist

21 **Oil-can and Funnel** 1958
Oil on board 18 x $12\frac{1}{2}$
Lent by the artist

22 **Bottle by Window I** 1958
Oil on board 12 x 12
Lent by the artist

23 **Town from Train** 1958
Oil on board $29\frac{1}{2}$ x 26
Lent by the artist



Man by Wall 1958 (24) 48 x 44 in

24 **Man by Wall** 1958
Oil on canvas 48 x 44
Lent by the artist

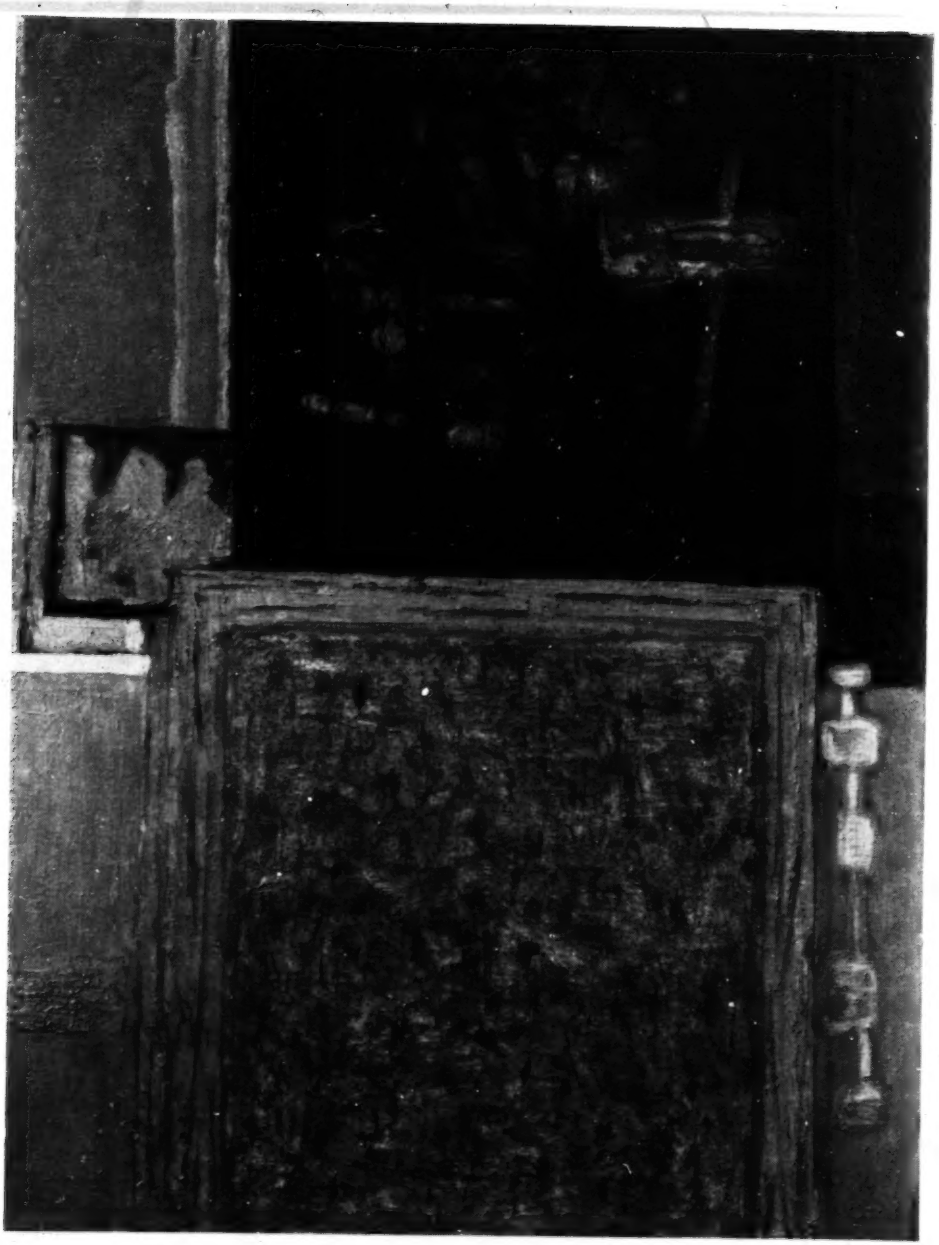
25 **Object on Yellow Wall** 1959
Oil on canvas 20 x 24
Lent by the artist

26 **Landscape through Glass III** 1959
Oil on board 15 x 12½
Lent by the artist

27 **Chemical Works I** 1959
Oil on canvas 44 x 56½
Lent by the artist

28 **Gravel Bin** 1959
Oil on canvas 42½ x 32
Lent by the artist

29 **Sand Bin** 1959
Oil on canvas 40 x 30
Lent by the artist



Gravel Bin 1959 (28) 42½ x 32 in

30 **Electrical Installation I** 1959
Oil on canvas 45 x 50
Lent by the artist

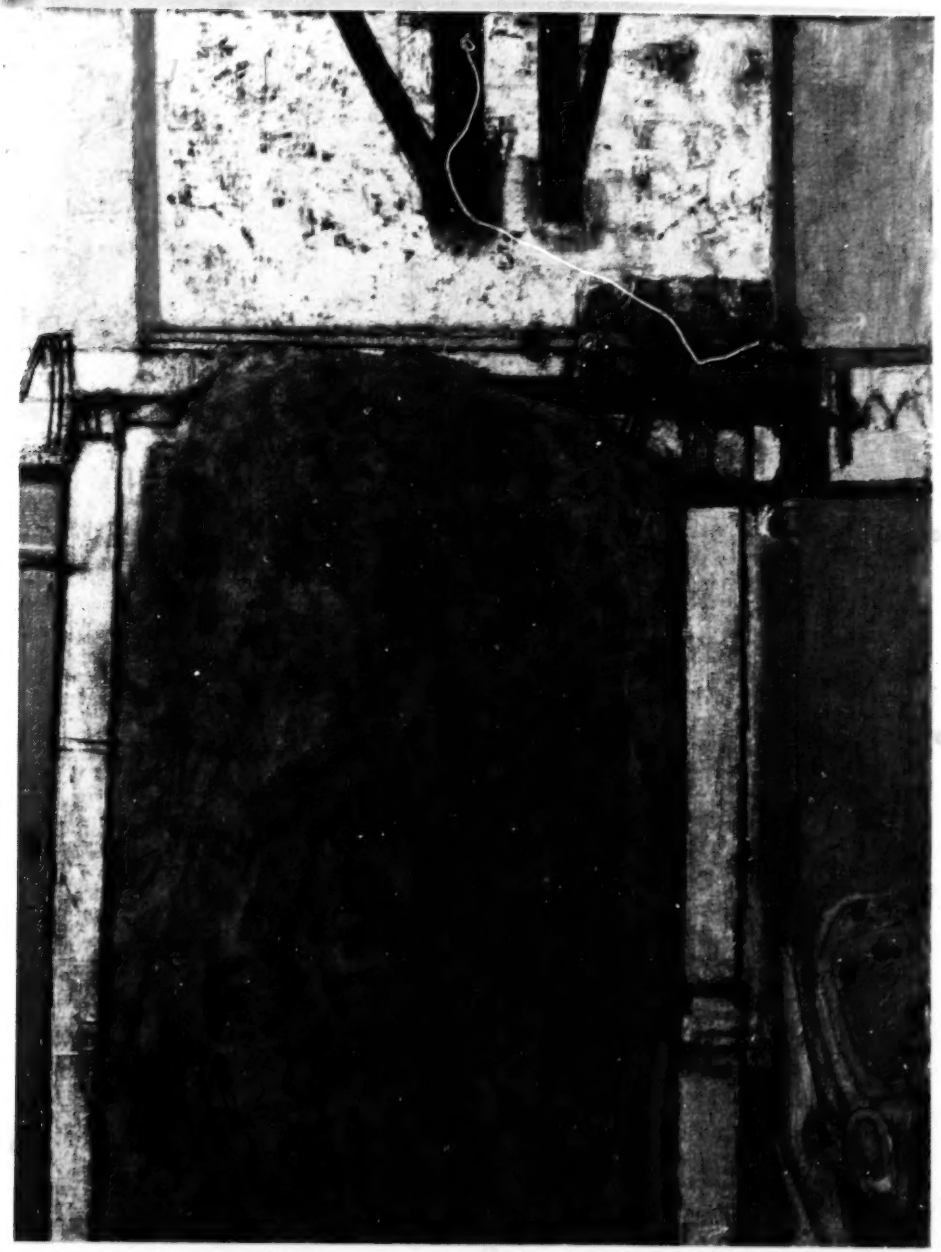
31 **Electrical Installation II** 1959
Oil on canvas 48 x 50
Lent by Michael Middleton, Esq.

32 **Industrial Interior III** 1959
Oil on canvas 21 x 28
Lent by the artist

33 **Electrical Installation IV** 1959
Oil on canvas 12 x 24
Lent by the artist

34 **Mining Area** 1959
Oil on canvas 37 x 45
Lent by the artist

35 **Landscape through Glass V** 1959
Oil on canvas 36 x 36
Lent by the artist



Sand Bin 1959 (29) 40 x 30 in

36 **Street at Night** 1959
Oil on canvas 30 x 25
Lent by the artist

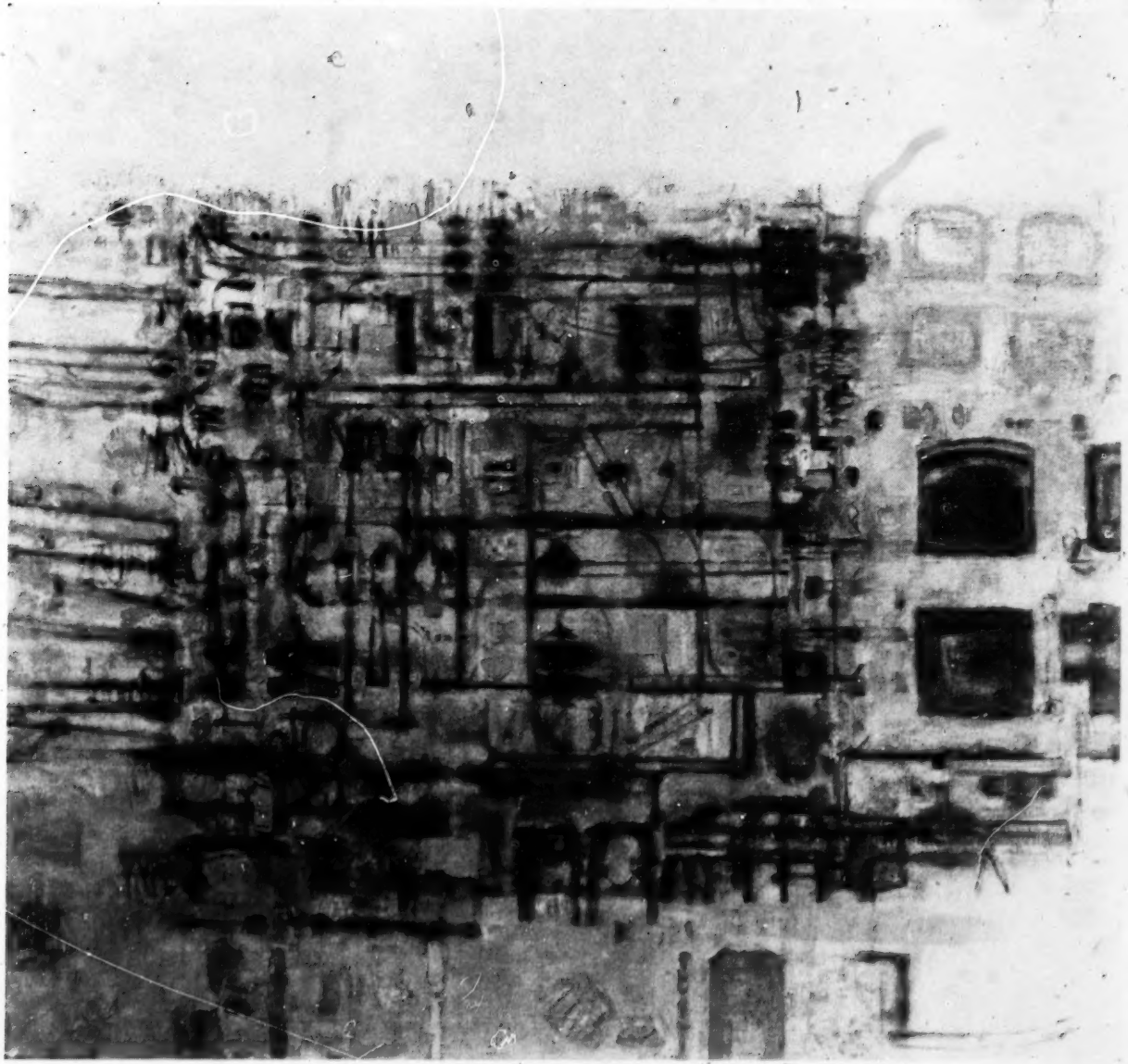
37 **Man in Gasworks at Night** 1959
Oil on canvas 40 x 50
Lent by the artist

38 **Landscape with Smoke** 1960
Oil on canvas 20 x 14
Lent by the artist

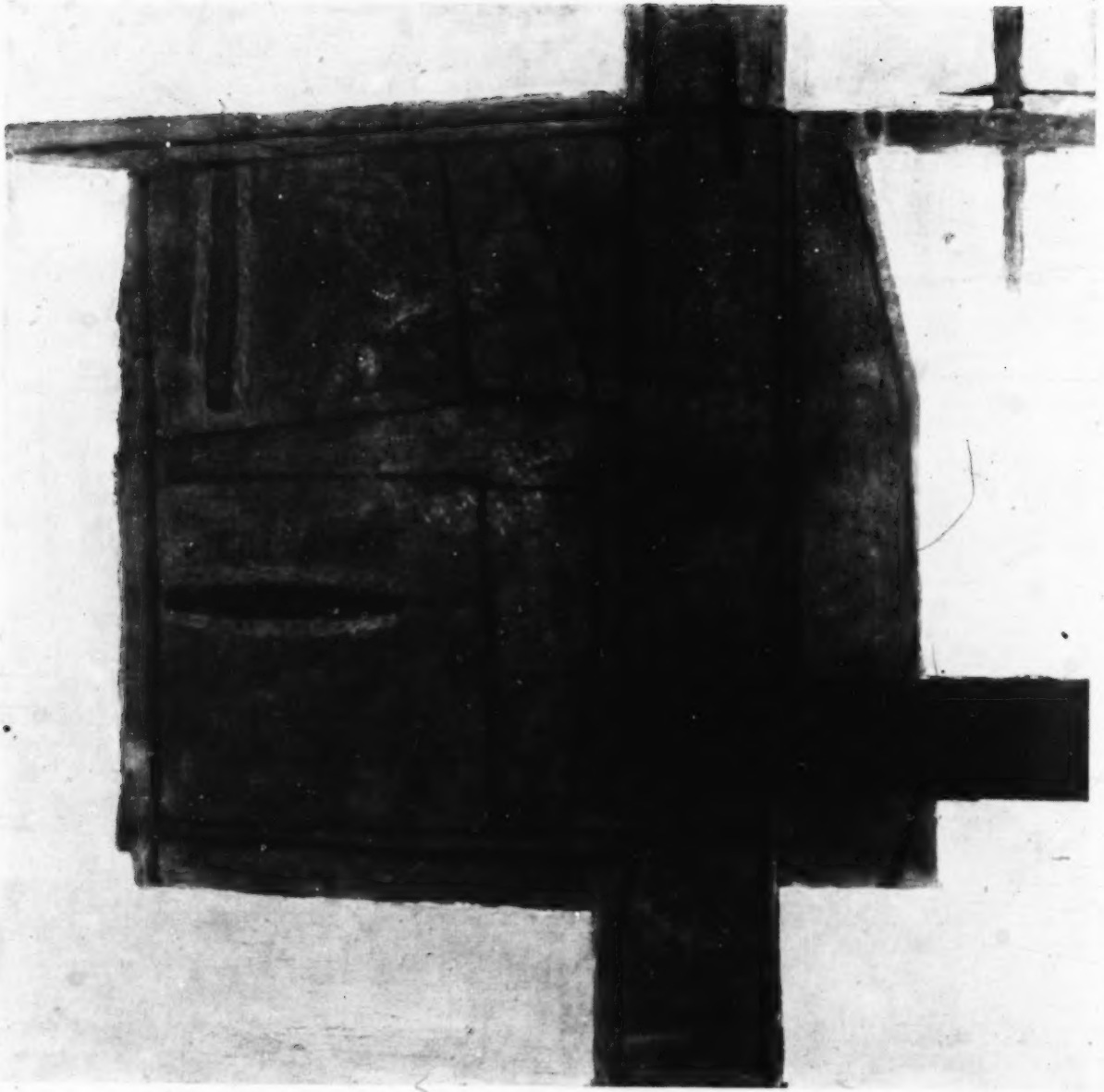
39 **Garden I** 1960
Oil on canvas 28 x 24½
Lent by Bryan Robertson, Esq.

40 **Chemical Works IV** 1960
Oil on canvas 36 x 40
Lent by the artist

41 **Electrical Landscape** 1960
Oil on canvas 60 x 64
Lent by the artist



Electrical Installation II 1959 (31) 48 x 50 in



Landscape through Glass V 1959 (35) 36 x 36 in